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AUTHOR Larsen, Knud S.
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ABSTRACT

Social categorization theory contains significant inferences for human communication research. The effect of common fate by subject inclusion in convergent or divergent experimental categories was ascertained by manipulation with Australian students who evaluated bogus Aboriginal art. Whereas previous research shows that social categorization produces negative attitudes and behavior, the current study showed that common fate produced positive attitude change. Consequently, the social categorization process can work both ways. Conclusions discuss the generic nature of group categorization. (Author)

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Social categorization and common fate: An
approach to attitude change¹

Knud S. Larsen

Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies

and

Oregon State University

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The social categories to which a person belongs are crucial to his social acceptance. At a very early point, the child learns which are "favorable" and which are "unfavorable" categories, and adjusts his attitudes accordingly. There are favorable and unfavorable religious, political, social class, and many other type of categories to which people respond in rather automatic and consistent fashion.

This categorization process probably developed as a function of reward and punishment. The child soon learns which categories are rewarding (e.g., parents), and which categories are associated with punishment.

Social-categorization theory has played a major function in understanding racial prejudice and discrimination. Rokeach (1960) found supportive evidence for the idea that differences in beliefs are crucial to social acceptance or rejection. Triandis (1961) however, felt that the social category "race" was the crucial factor. "People do not exclude other people from their neighborhood, for instance, because other people have different belief systems, but they do exclude them because they are Negroes" (p. 186).

The relative importance of race (social category), belief incongruence, and social costs have been evaluated by several researchers (e.g., Stein, Hardyck, & Brewster-Smith, 1965; Triandis & Davis, 1965; and Larsen, 1974). It is clear that social categorization constitutes a basic process which defines the social environment in terms of positive and negative attributes. In Tajfel's (1969) theory, categorization was seen as fundamental in the genesis of prejudice. Social categorization is the perception of differences,

so that on the basis of these differences people are assigned to groups. These groups in turn form two basic divisions. Those to which the person assimilates are called the ingroups and those which he rejects, differentiates, or contrasts from are called the outgroups.

Rabbie and Horowitz (1969) have shown the effect of social categorization. They indicate that the experience of common fate is fundamental to the social-categorization process. When people experience common fate as a result of belonging to a particular group, the result is favorable attitudes toward other members of that group and less favorable attitudes toward members of other groups. Decisions about members of "own group" and "other group" follow a similar pattern (Tajfel, Flament, Billig, & Bundy, 1971) with members of the ingroup treated more favorably than members of the outgroup. Doise (1969) showed that this biased treatment occurred prior to any interaction, which suggests that it is the biased perceptions which justify the discrimination. Perhaps social categorization is so basic a process that members of any other group (to which the individual does not belong) become suspect and are valued negatively. Doise, Csepeli, Dietrich-Dann, Gouge, Larsen, and Ostell (1971) showed that belonging to even an apparent nonsensical group elicited social categorization with resulting discriminatory behavior. The respondents were told that they belonged to a group (called either X or Y) on the basis of preferences for ambiguous photographs (blown-up pictures of blood cells). On the basis of this essentially nonsensical category, the participants rated members of their own group more favorably, gave less money to members of the other group (for participating in the experiment), and perceived members of the "other" group differently on some

physical traits. Since these behaviors took place prior to any interaction or decisions, we can assume that assignment to a group category (however non-sensical) is sufficient to produce outgroup rejection.

Since the categorization process is so basic to the acceptance and rejection of others, it can be used to promote or develop racial tolerance. What enables people to reject members of other races is the supportive (unconscious and automatic) bias elicited by categorization. Consequently, if members of groups (e.g., whites and Aborigines) are told they belong to a common third group and/or experience a sense of common fate, the result may be a more favorable reaction by the respondents. The experience of common fate serves to elicit an assimilation effect with the result that members of one group develop more favorable attitudes toward members of the other group (and any of their attitudes).

In summary, the purpose of this experiment was to ascertain the effect of common fate by inclusion in a common experimental category of "a preference pattern based on Aboriginal values" versus maintaining social categorization by "a preference based on white values."

Method

A discussion of subjects employed in the study, instruments used, and procedure follow.

The sample.

The subjects who participated in the pre-test consisted of 61 undergraduate students at James Cook University. Of these, 16 received the treatment

"a preference pattern based on Aboriginal values...", and 20 subjects received the treatment "preference based on white values." The lack of overlap between pre- and post-test groups of subjects is accounted for by sections of the class not used subsequently, nonattendance and incomplete responses.

Instruments.

The pre- and post-treatment tests were composed of a semantic differential adapted from the evaluative (attitudinal) dimension of Osgood's semantic differential (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957). The semantic differential was employed to evaluate ten drawings of "Aboriginal" topical art based on the following scenes: a campfire, river scene with canoe, fishing, a trail, sunset, animal scene, Aboriginal man, Aboriginal woman, Aboriginal boy, and Aboriginal girl. Although these scenes constitute what might be termed Aboriginal topics, they also contained sufficient ambiguity to permit the subject to assign his/her own meaning to the drawings.

Procedure of the experiment.

The experimental procedure was carried out in two class sections. The introduction to the experiment read "This is an experiment on aesthetic preferences for Aboriginal art being conducted throughout Australia. What we would like is your evaluation of a series of drawings made by an Aboriginal artist. Your evaluation can then be compared with those of other experiments. Just write in the letter corresponding to the drawing you prefer most out of each set. The standards you judge by are strictly your own." The ten drawings were then presented in five pairs, individually labeled A through J. In a space provided, the subject was asked to indicate his preference of each pair; i.e., either A or B, C or D, etc. This procedure was carried out to subsequently develop group categorization or the experience of "common fate."

The pre-test then followed. "We are also interested in your perceptions of the drawings. What we would like you to do is to rate these drawings on a number of words (adjectives). Simply indicate the rating of the drawings by circling the appropriate number between the two words. For example...." (An example followed.) The drawings were then rated on the aforementioned semantic differential.

One week later the experimenter returned with the "results" of the preference test for the drawings. "We would now like to give you the results of the experiment on aesthetics which we conducted last week. Generally, we find that people fall into one of two categories; i.e., Category X are those who show a preference pattern based on Aboriginal values. They clearly understand Aboriginal art. On the other hand, those in Category Y show a preference based on white values. They clearly do not understand Aboriginal art. We will now call out the "class experimental number" from 1 and up. When we call your number, please come forward and get your results." The above feedback was read to the subjects who also were given an individual copy.

The experimenter sat at a desk with a simulated "results" sheet. As each subject came forward he appeared to check the results and then gave the subjects either a Category X or Y feedback. This feedback followed a random pattern.

The Category X feedback read as follows. "The results on the test on aesthetic preferences show clearly that you belong to group X. That is, you clearly appreciate and understand art based on Aboriginal values. You understand Aboriginal art." Category Y feedback read, "The results of the test on

aesthetic preferences show clearly that you belong to group Y. That is, you clearly appreciate and understand art based on White values. You don't understand Aboriginal art."

The post test was then introduced with the following neutral instruction. "Sometimes people's opinions are fairly constant and sometimes opinions change with time. We would now like you to evaluate the drawings again." This was followed by a presentation of the drawings which the subjects rated on the semantic differential. Finally, we asked, "We are interested in any comments you may have about the experiments." This question was asked to see whether the experimental rationale was accepted.

All the comments elicited referred to the quality of the drawings or the difficulty of the rating tasks. Subsequent discussion indicated complete acceptance of the experimental rationale. The subjects were then debriefed and told the purpose of the experiment.

Results and Discussion

Did the creation of "common fate" through inclusion in the category "a preference based on Aboriginal values," produce a more positive attitude toward "Aboriginal" topical art when compared to the group which received feedback maintaining social categorization by "a preference based on white values." To ascertain the mean difference between the two conditions and the significance of these differences, we completed a t test for the subjects who participated in both conditions. The results of the t test are shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

As we can see, attitudes became significantly more positive in the post test with a mean difference of -1.8. Since the post test included both experimental groups, we cannot ascertain whether this change can be attributed to the experimental treatment. The t value between the pre-condition and the "common fate" experimental treatment is shown in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

The t value is significant with a mean difference and is larger than that reported for the pre- and post-condition (Table 1). Consequently, we may conclude that the experience of "common fate" produces a positive attitude change toward "Aboriginal" topical art, and by logical extension to Aborigines.

Further support is found in the t value between the pre-condition and the post test for those subjects given the Category Y treatment (preference based on white values). Since the purpose of this treatment was to maintain social categorization, we would only expect chance differences to occur. The t value (-1.19, $p = .239$) supports this proposition. The significant attitude change may therefore be attributed directly to the experience of "common fate" induced by the Category X treatment.

Summary and Conclusions

The major question of the study concerned the effect of the experience of "common fate" on attitudes. By means of an experimental manipulation, two groups were created. One induced "common fate" by assuring the respondents that they belonged to a social category which "showed a preference based on Aboriginal values", whereas the other experimental feedback maintained social

categorization by telling a group of subjects that they showed a "preference based on white values". The experimental manipulation successfully produced positive attitude change toward a series of drawings purported to be Aboriginal topical art. We have, therefore, shown that the social-categorization process can work both ways. Previously cited research shows that social categorization produces negative attitudes and behavior. Since these negative attitudes and behavior occur prior to interaction, social categorization presumably induces automatic prejudicial responses. This study has shown that it is possible to produce more positive attitudes toward a previously discrepant attitudinal object ("Aboriginal" topical art) by creating a sense of common fate. Social categorization can therefore also be used to create greater tolerance. This finding has some implications for social policy.

First, it is important to fully understand the effect of the social-categorization process. The elicitation of ethnocentrism is seen by some as a natural outcome of group consciousness (Schmidt, 1960), whereas Merton (1957) believed that group consciousness could produce positive, negative, or neutral attitudes. The research emphasis however, has focussed on the minimal condition for producing outgroup bias (in particular the ease in eliciting such bias). The now famous "Robbers Cave Study" (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961) showed severe intergroup antagonisms as a function of experimentally created competition. Sherif therefore maintained that intergroup hostility is a function of groups which are well-established, operating in competitive or frustrating interactions. Rabbie and Horowitz (1969) narrowed the "minimal" conditions under which group categorization produces discrimination to the experience of "common fate." Group consciousness is then a function of

some situation which finds people together in a group or some common task. The authors concluded "Group classification per se appears to be insufficient to produce discriminatory evaluations" (Rabbie & Horwitz, 1969, p. 272). As we have seen, these results were challenged by Tajfel, et al. (1971) who showed that irrelevant classification produced discriminatory behavior. A study conducted by this author with others (Doise et al., 1971) showed that irrelevantly created group categorization prior to interaction or decision, produced discriminatory behavior. In other words, belonging to any category, even a nonsensical category, is a sufficiently minimal condition eliciting prejudice.

We may speculate as to the underlying social dynamics which produce this effect. However, this effect seems to be a "built in" consequence of certain societies. "It is, however, possible that certain societies create, or certainly contribute to, what might be called a 'generic' out-group attitude...: in other words, that norms, values and expectations present in their modes of socialization and education foster or reinforce a tendency to behave differentially towards out-groups and in-groups even when such behavior has no 'utilitarian' value to the individual or his group, and even when a particular categorization has very little meaning in terms of the emotional investment that it represents and in terms of differences between groups on which it is based. Much of the work in social psychology on the adaptive cognitive functions of articulating the social world in terms of clear-cut categories is consonant with this assumption..." (Tajfel, et al., 1971, p. 151).

Group categorization does not generate in a vacuum, but is, in turn, dependent on the more basic social processes. The work of Sherif and his

co-workers gives a sound "hint" that these underlying processes reflect competitive interaction and scarce resources. As long as society is dominated by competition between groups over perceived scarce resources and by status concerns growing out of esteem needs in a competitive society, group categorization will produce the rather automatic, almost reflexive bias in favor of the ingroup.

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FOOTNOTE

- 1 The research reported here was presented at the Annual meeting of the Western Psychological Association, San Francisco, April, 1978.

Table 1
Mean values, standard deviations, and t
value for pre- and post-groups for attitudes
toward Aboriginal topical art

	<u>$\bar{X}$</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>Significance</u>
Pre-group	28.71	5.22		
Post-group	30.52	4.62	-2.23	.033

Table 2

Mean values, standard deviations, and t value
for pre-group and experimental ("a preference
for Aboriginal values") group for attitudes
toward Aboriginal topical art

	$\bar{X}$	SD	t	Significance
Pre-group	28.58	5.97		
Experimental Common fate group	31.06	4.74	-1.80	.05

ABSTRACT

Social categorization theory contains significant inferences for human communication research. The present study seeks to ascertain the effect of common fate by subject inclusion in convergent or divergent experimental categories. This manipulation was conducted with Australian students evaluating bogus Aboriginal art. Whereas previous research shows that social categorization produces negative attitudes and behavior, the current study showed that common fate produced positive attitude change. Consequently, the social categorization process can work both ways. Conclusions discuss the generic nature of group categorization.